

6. NOTES ON THE NILGIRI TAHR (HEMITRAGUS HYLOCRIUS)

I was most interested in the two articles on Nilgiri Tahr on pages 365 and 535 of the December 1970 issue of the *Journal* Vol. 67 (3). It is sad to think how the herds of Tahr have been thinned out, but it is encouraging to know that they are still holding out in some areas.

I arrived in the Anamallai Planting District as a green junior assistant in 1924, and I left the district for a job in our head office in Coimbatore in 1939. Until 1956, when I retired from India, I travelled over most of the planting districts in S. India and got to know them well.

Between 1924 and 1939 I spent nearly all my local leave in jungle trips, and I can claim to know the Nelliampathi Hills, Mount Stewart and Top Slip, and all the hill country between the Anamallai Planting District and the High Range, very well indeed. I spent many camps in the Gundrow area on the NE slope of the Anamallais, and I also know the Kundah and Muhkerti Peak areas of the Nilgiris. I have made a number of camping trips to the White Bison country in the Manjampatti/Talanji area. All these areas used to carry herds of Tahr and the following notes may be of interest—if only now—unfortunately of historical interest.

The Anamallai grass hills between the Anamallai Planting District and the High Range over the Travancore boundary supported huge herds of Tahr between the years 1924 and 1937. They were to be found in quantity on all the main peaks and ridges from as low down as what is now Akkamallai Tea Estate, over the Koramparai ridge, the Kornellar Valley, Oosimallai and all the peaks out to Peratamallai. Outliers from these herds probably spread through the heavy forest over the ridge to the North-East as Tahr were often, but not always to be found on Pachaipalmallai over what is now Waterfall Estate, and on the rocky slopes above and near Waverley Estate and right down to the Velloni angle station on the old Ropeway. The record Tahr head for the Anamallais was shot on the twin rocky hills at the foot of the old Anamallai Ghat Road—Tadaganachimallai. P. T. French and I one Sunday morning found a fine saddleback in a wire snare on one of the rocky pinnacles overlooking the ghat road, and within a few yards of the road just below Attakatti. The wire had bitten so deep that we had to kill it.

Tahr meat is very highly flavoured and has a very strong smell. Probably for these reasons it has a reputation of medicinal value. It was always in great demand and commanded a good price per pound. Large inroads into all this territory have been made by forestry plan-

ting, Cinchona planting, and irrigation schemes. Even before I left the Anamallais in 1939 there was extensive poaching most week ends by gangs of labourers from these schemes. By that time there were few tahr left even on Oosimallai and Koramparai.

It is sometimes said that tahr do not travel in heavy evergreen forest, but this is certainly not true in this area. They make quite long treks through heavy forest to graze on small rocky outcrops of grass which are found here and there in this area. On the western side of the old Vellonie bridle-path there is a ridge of rocky peaks running down towards Perambakulam. These all held large numbers of tahr, but as they were terribly difficult to get over they were seldom visited. These areas have remained comparatively undisturbed and they probably still hold tahr.

Brownbacks and Saddlebacks were seldom seen in or near the large herds of does during the dry winter months. From about the end of November until mid or late April they would be found living singly or in small troops, usually in the scrub on the edge of grassy slopes, in contrast to the does and kids which kept to the tops and open grass.

About the end of April, after the first pre-monsoon thunder showers, the bucks started coming back into the herds, and they stayed with them throughout the S.W. Monsoon months and through till the end of October. The S.W. Monsoon is very severe in this area and even now the tahr are probably pretty safe during this period. There is no incentive for anyone to even camp up there then.

I well remember watching some tahr coming up a steep khud on the edge of the Kornellar Valley one year in mid May. It was misty in patches, and a violent thunder storm was working up towards the Valley. No less than 12 Saddlebacks and 4 Brownbacks came up that track in single file, and spread out on the grass in the Valley to join a large herd of does at the foot of Oosimallai.

On another occasion during a short break in the S.W. Monsoon in July I shot two saddlebacks in 20 minutes on the open grass at the top of the Koramparai ridge, and there were several more saddlebacks and brownbacks with this large herd.

It was not at all uncommon to see herds of from 50 to 150 strong in this area. These large herds, or congregations, were most common in the dry weather and were nearly always composed of does and kids.

In the course of many years wandering on these hills I came to believe that the bucks stay brownbacked for the first three years or so of their lives. About the third or fourth year they develop a light saddle in the breeding season, but they often lose this again for a

year after the season is over. From then onwards the white saddle is permanent and it becomes whiter and more grizzled as the years go by. This may well be a local characteristic.

It has been said that wild dog seldom hunt tahr. This again is certainly not true in this area. They very frequently hunt them here. I have watched a pack hunt a tahr right through the middle of a herd. The herd itself paid very little attention except to give the hunted animal plenty of room to pass through, and none of the dogs turned aside after any other animal. There used to be a lot of hill panther on these hills—many of them black. These lived largely on the tahr as their staple food.

A herd of tahr once turned up in a newly felled clearing of forest in Anaimudi Estate in the Mudis Group on the Anamallais. They were a very long way inside forest, and far from any grass, and they had probably been chased there by wild dogs.

In the Nilgiris there used to be fair number of tahr all along the edge of the escarpment from Mukerti Peak to behind the Bangitappal Forest Rest House, on the steep slopes overlooking the Silent Valley, and right out to Sispara. It is good to know that some of them are still there. All this area gets a very heavy S.W. Monsoon with gale winds and torrential rain, and as it is well off any beaten track it seems probable that the tahr may survive there for some time yet. In addition to these herds there were small herds on the precipitous slopes falling into the Bhavani Valley where the Chembar River topples off the plateau. These tahr used to graze the open grass around the Chembar River, but this may have become too dangerous for them. The herds ranged all along the steep slopes overlooking the Bhavani Valley, and I have seen them on the open grass hills below Carrington Estate and on all the other steep hills around the bottom of the Peermund River where that topples over the edge of the plateau. I visited this area in 1969/70. The character of the country has been greatly changed by hydroelectric schemes and the planting of wattle and gum trees. It has also been extensively roaded where few foot tracks existed before. It seems likely therefore that the game, including the tahr, have been driven out to less frequented areas. There are plenty of these still in the Attapadi area, and in Manarghat, and I think it is quite likely that tahr may survive in some of these isolated spots. As I have mentioned in connection with the Anamallais they will travel considerable distances through forests between isolated grass patches.

Incidentally all the Kundah Range in the Nilgiris used to carry large packs of wild dogs. Their main source of food supply were

the large number of sambar and pig that used to abound, but I have no doubt that they killed the odd tahr too.

The company for whom I worked opened up the Tea Estates on the High Wavys and I know this area well. There are still a few tahr there but the herds are very small. Like some of the tahr in the Anamallais they travel considerable distances through dense and heavy forest from grass patch to grass patch. There is a huge area of unopened virgin forest here right down to the Periyar Game Reserve, and it is quite likely that a survey would discover that there were still small herds of ibex throughout the area.

I have not been in the Nelliampathi hills since 1942. Then there were a fair number of tahr there in the Contengady Estate area. But there has been a lot of development in this district since then, and all game may well have been driven out.

I was very interested to read that small herds still survive further south in the more isolated areas of forest. I think it is very probable that a search in areas I have described above might reveal other herds in isolated areas of which there are many suitable ones.

The Nilgiri Tahr is an adaptable animal, and might quite possibly adapt itself to a safer way of living than the great herds of the Anamallais and the High Range which used to live almost entirely in open grass land. The smallness of the bands that lived in the more isolated areas was probably due to the fact that they had to wander considerable distances to find suitable grazing. I have seen tahr nibble at browse. I do not think that they browse habitually where grazing is plentiful, but is possible that they might become habitual browsers if good grazing areas were restricted.

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7. AN ALBINISTIC GADWALL FROM INDIA

(With two plates)

Through the kindness of Mr. J. C. Daniel of the Bombay Natural History Society we have been invited to examine and comment on an albinistic example of the Gadwall, *Anas strepera* Linnaeus. This bird was collected on November 25th, 1967, at Bharatpur, Rajasthan, India; Museum No. 127-68 and is a female.